



Korea, Democratic People's Republic of

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for "freedom of religious belief"; however, in practice the Government severely restricts religious freedom, including organized religious activity, except that which is supervised tightly by officially recognized groups linked to the Government. Genuine religious freedom does not exist.

There was no change in the extremely poor level of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The regime has continued to repress unauthorized religious groups. Religious persons who proselytize or who have ties to overseas evangelical groups operating in the People's Republic of China (PRC) were subject to arrest and harsh penalties, according to several unconfirmed reports. Defector reports continued to allege that the regime arrested and executed members of underground Christian churches in prior years. Due to the inaccessibility of the country and inability to gain timely information, the continuation of this activity during the time period covered by this report remains difficult to verify. The Government allowed foreigners to attend government-sponsored religious services.

No information was available on societal attitudes toward religious freedom.

The U.S. Government does not have diplomatic relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Since 2001, the Secretary of State has designated the DPRK as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The U.S. Government raised its concerns about the deplorable state of human rights in the country at the Six-Party Talks and other meetings with DPRK officials.

The Government does not allow representatives of foreign governments, journalists, or other visitors the freedom of movement that would enable them to assess fully human rights conditions in the country. This report is based on information obtained over more than a decade, updated where possible by information drawn from recent interviews, reports, defector accounts, and other documentation. While limited in detail, this information is indicative of the religious freedom situation during the period covered by this report.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 47,000 square miles, and its population is estimated at 22.4 million. The number of religious believers is unknown but has been estimated by the Government to be 10,000 Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, and 4,000 Catholics. Estimates by South Korean church-related groups are considerably higher. In addition, the Chondogyo Young Friends Party, a government-approved group based on a traditional religious movement, has approximately 40,000 practitioners. According to a South Korean press report, in 2002 the chairman of the Association of North Korean Catholics stated that the Catholic community in the North had no priests but held weekly prayer services at the Changchung Catholic church in Pyongyang. According to State-controlled media reports, following the passing of Pope John Paul II, a memorial service was held at this church and services were also held at family worship places across the country.

Two Protestant churches under lay leadership--the Pongsu and Chilgok churches--and the Changchung Roman Catholic church have been open since 1988 in Pyongyang. However, these churches are tightly controlled by the State. One of the Protestant churches is dedicated to the memory of former North Korean leader Kim Il Sung's mother, Kang Pan Sok, who was a Presbyterian deaconess. Several foreigners residing in Pyongyang attended Korean-language services at these churches on a regular basis. Some foreigners who have visited the country over the years stated that church activity appears staged, noting that sermons contain both religious and political content supportive of the regime. Foreign legislators attending services in Pyongyang in previous years noted that the congregations all arrived at and departed the services as a group on tour buses. The Government claims that there are more than 500 authorized "house churches." Although some visitors accept this estimate, the regime has not allowed outsiders the access necessary to confirm such claims. Likewise, outsiders have limited ability to ascertain the level of government control over these groups, but it is generally assumed they are monitored closely.

Hundreds of religious figures visited the country in past years, including papal representatives, the Reverend Billy Graham, and religious delegations from the Republic of Korea (ROK), the United States, and other countries. In June 2005 Venerable Beop

Jang, head of the largest Buddhist group in the Republic of Korea and the current chair of the national council on religious leaders in that country, traveled to Pyongyang to mark the fifth anniversary of the Inter-Korean summit. There appear to have been fewer visitors since the Government expelled United Nations inspectors from nuclear facilities in 2003. Vatican representatives, including Archbishop Celestino Migliore, Vatican Undersecretary for Relations with States, visited the country in 2000 and 2002. On each occasion, the delegation reported meeting with the Catholic community in Pyongyang and with officials of the Association of North Korean Catholics. During the 2002 visit, the delegation celebrated the Feast of the Ascension with the local and international Catholic community at the Changchung church in Pyongyang. In 2001 a delegation from the Seoul Archdiocese of the Catholic Church visited the country and met with officials of the Association of North Korean Catholics.

Foreign religious activity frequently is connected with humanitarian relief, and overseas religious relief organizations have been active in responding to the country's food crisis. An overseas Buddhist group, Join Together Society, continued to operate a factory in the Rajin-Sonbong Free Trade Zone to produce food for preschool children, which it has done since 1998. A noodle factory established by contributions from Catholics of the Seoul Archdiocese opened in 2001. The Unification Church, which has business ventures in the country, is believed to be constructing an interfaith religious facility in Pyongyang.

There are an estimated 300 Buddhist temples. Most of the temples are regarded as cultural relics, but religious activity is permitted in some of them. A few Buddhist temples and relics have been renovated or restored in recent years under a broader effort aimed at "preserving the Korean nation's cultural heritage." In November 2004, construction on the main hall of the Singyesa Temple near the Mt. Kumgang Resort was completed. This construction was financed by a South Korean Buddhist group and a branch of the South Korean business Hyundai Asan. A South Korean monk, the first to permanently reside in North Korea, has lived at the temple since construction ended, but was expected to serve primarily as a guide for visiting tourists rather than undertaking pastoral care for Buddhists living in the area. According to DPRK media accounts, renovation of the Ryongthong temple in Kaesong was completed in early 2005. State-controlled press highlighted Buddhist ceremonies on several occasions and related them to the broader theme of Korean unification.

In September 2003, construction reportedly was completed of the Pyongyang Theological Academy, a graduate institution that trains pastors and evangelists. Construction of a Russian Orthodox Church in Pyongyang continued and two men have been sent to Russia to train as priests.

There are unconfirmed reports of underground Christian churches. Some older citizens who were religious believers before 1953 reportedly have maintained their faith in secret over the years.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for "freedom of religious belief"; however, in practice the Government severely restricts religious freedom, including discouraging organized religious activities except those controlled by officially recognized groups. Genuine religious freedom does not exist. The Constitution also stipulates that religion "should not be used for purposes of dragging in foreign powers or endangering public security."

"Juche," or self-reliance, the Government's state ideology, and the personality cult of "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-Il have become a kind of civil religion used by the Government as a "spiritual" underpinning for its rule. Refusal on religious or other grounds to accept the leader as the supreme authority exemplifying the State and society's needs is regarded as opposition to the national interest and may result in severe punishment.

Although the country's first constitution guaranteed freedom of religion, the Government identified large numbers of religiously active persons as "counterrevolutionaries," both during and immediately after the Korean War of 1950-53. Many of these individuals were subsequently killed or imprisoned in concentration camps. The Government later codified the oppression of religion in the early 1970s through a constitutional revision on "freedom of antireligious activity." The Government began to moderate its religious discrimination policies in the late 1980s, when it launched a campaign highlighting Kim Il Sung's "benevolent politics." As part of this campaign, the regime allowed the formation of several government-sponsored religious organizations. These organizations serve as interlocutors with foreign church groups and international aid organizations. Foreigners who have met with representatives of these organizations believe that some members are genuinely religious but note that others appear to know little about religious dogma or teaching. These organizations continue to operate. A constitutional change in 1992 authorized religious gatherings, provided for "the right to build buildings for religious use," and deleted the clause regarding freedom of antireligious propaganda.

Civic groups and religious organizations in the ROK continue to be active in efforts to promote inter-Korean reconciliation. During the reporting period, Buddhist and Christian groups from the ROK have traveled to the country for discussions and cultural exchanges with their North Korean counterparts and ended the meetings in joint prayer sessions for unification. These exchanges generally receive favorable coverage in the State-controlled media; however, their true effect on religious freedom in the country is unclear.

Several schools for religious education exist in the country. There are 3-year colleges for training Protestant and Buddhist clergy. A religious studies program also was established at Kim Il Sung University in 1989; its graduates usually work in the foreign

trade sector. In 2000 a Protestant seminary was reopened with assistance from foreign missionary groups. Critics, including at least one foreign sponsor, charged that the Government opened the seminary only to facilitate reception of assistance funds from foreign faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The Federation of Chosun Christianity, a religious group believed to be controlled by the Government, contributed to the curriculum used by the seminary.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Korea Institute for National Unification's (KINU) 2005 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea indicates that the regime utilizes authorized religious entities for external propaganda and political purposes and that local citizens are strictly barred from entering their places of worship. Ordinary citizens consider such sites to be primarily "sightseeing spots for foreigners."

Little is known about the day-to-day life of religious persons in the country. Members of government-controlled religious groups do not appear to suffer discrimination. In fact some reports claim, and circumstantial evidence suggests, that many, if not most, have been mobilized by the regime. There are unconfirmed reports that the nonreligious children of religious believers may be employed at midlevels of the Government. In the past, such individuals suffered broad discrimination with sometimes severe penalties or even imprisonment. Members of underground churches connected to border missionary activity are regarded as subversive elements.

In 2001 the U.N. Human Rights Committee noted "with regret" that the Government was unable to provide up-to-date information about religious freedom in the country. The committee also noted its concern regarding the authorities' practice with respect to religious freedom, "in the light of information available to the committee that religious practice is repressed or strongly discouraged." The committee requested that the Government provide up-to-date information regarding the number of citizens belonging to religious communities and the number of places of worship, as well as "practical measures taken by the authorities to guarantee freedom of exercise of religious practice" by the religious communities in the country.

The KINU 2005 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea concludes, "North Korea utilizes religious activities only for political and economic goals; namely, to improve its international image, to secure humanitarian assistance from overseas, and to earn foreign currency."

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government deals harshly with all opponents, including those engaging in religious practices deemed unacceptable to the regime. Religious and human rights groups outside of the country have provided numerous, usually unconfirmed, reports that members of underground churches have been beaten, arrested, tortured, or killed because of their religious beliefs. Over the years, defectors have claimed that Christians were imprisoned and tortured for reading the Bible and talking about God.

Over the years, and during this reporting period, defectors have reported testing on human subjects of a variety of chemical and biological agents, including lethal gas. Some accounts have alleged that political or religious detainees were specifically selected for this testing. The DPRK effectively bars outside observers from investigating these reports. However, the collective weight of anecdotal evidence over the years of harsh treatment of unauthorized political or religious activity may lend some credibility to such reports.

There is evidence of the execution of approximately 60-70 individuals in late 2004 and early 2005. Unconfirmed reports allege that the reasons for execution included, in a few cases, contact with missionaries and other foreigners while in China.

In 2002, witnesses testified before the U.S. Congress on the treatment of persons held in prison camps through the early 1990s. The witnesses stated that prisoners held on the basis of their religious beliefs generally were treated worse than other inmates. One witness, a former prison guard, testified that because the authorities taught "all religions are opium," those believing in God were regarded as insane. He recounted an instance in which a woman was kicked repeatedly and left with her injuries unattended for days because a guard overheard her praying for a child who was being beaten. Another individual testified that in 1990, while serving a sentence in a prison that had a cast-iron factory, she witnessed the killing of several elderly Christians by security officers who poured molten iron on them after they refused to renounce their religion and accept the state ideology of *juche*.

The regime has reportedly increased repression and persecution of unauthorized religious groups in recent years. Reports indicate that persons engaging in religious proselytizing, those who have ties to overseas evangelical groups operating across the border with China, and, specifically, those repatriated and found to have contacted Christian missionaries outside the country have been arrested and subjected to harsh punishment. This has included imprisonment, prolonged detention without charge, torture, or execution. The Government reportedly was concerned that faith-based South Korean relief and refugee assistance efforts along the northeast border of China have both humanitarian and political goals, including overthrow of the regime. The official Korean Workers Party newspaper has criticized "imperialists and reactionaries" for trying to use ideological and cultural infiltration, including religion, to destroy socialism from within.

One South Korean missionary asserted that the Government was conducting "education sessions" to identify Christian leaders so that they could be apprehended in periodic crackdowns. News reports in recent years indicated that the Government has

increased the reward for information on any person doing missionary work in the Chinese border region.

There is no reliable information on the number of religious detainees or prisoners, but there are unconfirmed reports that many people are detained for their religious beliefs and activities. Prison conditions are harsh; starvation and forced labor are common. Visitors to the country have observed prisoners being marched in leg irons, metal collars, or shackles. Sanitation is poor, and prisoners reported having no change of clothing during months of detention.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

There was no information available on societal attitudes toward religious freedom. The regime does not allow representatives of foreign governments, journalists, or other visitors the freedom of movement that would enable them to assess fully religious freedom in the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The United States does not have diplomatic relations with the DPRK and has no official presence there. Since 2001 the Secretary of State has designated the DPRK as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

The U.S. Government regularly raises religious freedom concerns about the country in multilateral forums and bilaterally with other governments. U.S. officials urge other countries to condition their bilateral relations with the country on concrete, verifiable, and sustained improvements. During Six-Party Talks held in Beijing in August 2003 and February 2004, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs highlighted U.S. concerns about the deplorable human rights record of the DPRK regime. The Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor testified before the House International Relations Committee in March 2005. The U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor testified before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus in 2002. They and the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom have repeatedly raised awareness of the deplorable human rights conditions in the country through speeches before U.S. audiences.

In response to serious concerns over the country's human rights record, the U.S. Congress enacted the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004. The Act also establishes the position of Special Envoy on Human Rights in North Korea to coordinate and promote efforts to improve respect for fundamental human rights.

At the 61st session of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, the U.S. Government co-sponsored a resolution condemning the DPRK regime for its human rights record. The resolution called on the Government to fulfill its obligations under human rights instruments to which it is a party and ensure that humanitarian organizations and the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the DPRK have free access to the country.

In 2004, the U.S. Department of State provided the National Endowment for Democracy with a \$350,000 grant to improve and expand monitoring and reporting on human rights conditions in the DPRK. The Department of State also provided a grant to Freedom House for a series of conferences and other activities dedicated to pressuring the regime to end its abuses. Radio Free Asia also provides regular Korean-language broadcasting. U.S. Government policy allows U.S. citizens to travel to the country, and a number of churches and religious groups have organized efforts to alleviate suffering caused by shortages of food and medicine.

The DPRK remains subject to the economic restrictions of the 1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment on international trade. Following CPC designation in 2001, these restrictions were also tied to the DPRK's status under the International Religious Freedom Act.

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